

Integrating Wildlife Conservation into Local Land-Use Decisions May 25 and 26, 2005

Note: The following summary of the results of this workshop reflects the collective discussion and general conclusions of the workshop participants and does not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Fish and Game, the Wildlife Diversity Project at UC Davis, or any individual participant.

The Issue

Land-use decisions made at the county and municipal levels define the landscape. Without specific policies, regulations, or plans, land-use decisions are often reactive in response to a developer's plans for residential or commercial development. The need for housing, tax revenues that come from commercial development, the desire for recreation and open space, and necessary infrastructure are just some of the pressures on California's lands as its population continues to grow. Short-term, reactive land-use decisions lead to unnecessary loss of California's wildlife resources.

Current Situation

Wildlife conservation is generally not considered in local land-use decisions, and the state lacks policies, funding, or standards for integrating wildlife conservation into local and regional actions. The issues in integrating wildlife conservation into local land-use decisions are planning; regulations and incentives; funding and infrastructure; leadership; and public awareness and support. The overarching context for these issues is the economic pressures confronting local governments. These pressures encourage new commercial development that generates tax revenue for basic public services.

Project-by-project development review does not conserve wildlife.

Local land-use planning is typically done at a project level. But wildlife conservation on a project-by-project basis is not effective; it must be addressed on a broader, landscape scale.

The lack of an integrated planning approach among state, regional, county, and local entities works against a viable wildlife conservation strategy. Moreover, wildlife conservation is not integrated with planning for transportation, floodplain management, and agricultural conversion.

Wildlife conservation has largely had a species-specific, reactive approach, focusing on threatened and endangered species or on a habitat "hot spot," rather than a proactive focus on regional landscapes and ecosystems.

Local land-use decision-makers are not likely to consider wildlife conservation unless they have given the issue consideration in a comprehensive planning process or are required to do so through CEQA.

There are not adequate regulatory requirements or incentives to facilitate integrating wildlife conservation into local land-use decisions.

Statewide policies do not require local agencies to plan for conserving wildlife. Incentives might include local grants, streamlined regulatory processes for addressing wildlife impacts, or flexibility in projects with tools like mitigation banking or the transfer of development rights.

Flexibility is important, whether in regulatory requirements or incentives, to allow for differences between rural and urban landscapes and different situations throughout the state. There is also recognition that existing processes and regulations are obstacles to wildlife conservation; e.g., development ordinances that make it difficult or impossible to build in an environmentally sensitive manner.

Local jurisdictions need either a “carrot” or a “stick” to integrate wildlife conservation into land-use decisions. If they are required to plan for and address wildlife, funding will be necessary.

Local governments generally lack the resources in funds, staff time, data, and information to protect wildlife at the local level.

Funding and attention to green infrastructure (open space, greenways) is inadequate. There is a lack of funding and capacity for integrated, long-term planning, for habitat acquisition, or for wildlife conservation operations and management.

What opportunities there are for funding are limited by a very competitive environment; if competing with health and human services or with housing needs, wildlife will be at the end of the line. If funding does become available, it is typically on a one-time basis or tied to capital investments. There is a lack of dependable funding available over a period of time.

There is a sense that existing data are not sufficient to inform local decision-making. Moreover, there are no state or regional priorities or standards for addressing wildlife conservation on a broader scale.

Leadership at the local level is key to integrating wildlife conservation into local land-use decisions.

Leadership is about local decision-makers and elected officials having a long-term, proactive vision. It is about choosing long-term quality of life over short-term economic gains. It

is about demanding and financing research and planning to guide growth and development. Leadership is also about seeing the opportunities and benefits of planning integration and of working across geopolitical boundaries and across agencies. It is seeing the big picture and considering long-term issues.

Elected officials and planning committees are limited by their terms of office and by the nature of the job. They are expected to be experts in everything from waste management to budgets to conservation. They are limited by the pressures of balancing diverse and competing interests. Administrators are limited by institutional inertia and bureaucratic systems that fragment projects and are obstacles to systemic, integrated approaches. And in the absence of guidance for planning, regulation, or policy, they are limited in their ability to impose direction.

The level of public awareness, understanding and support regarding wildlife conservation affects decisions of local elected officials and administrators.

Communities and individuals need to be engaged at all levels to facilitate new approaches to local land use and to bring about individual behavior change. There is considered to be a general lack of knowledge or passion for integrating conservation into local land-use decisions; wildlife conservation is not included in most people's definition of quality of life. And while people may know about biodiversity, endangered species, or specific species, they are less aware of the relationship between wildlife conservation and land use. But without citizen outcry, a long-term vision for wildlife conservation will be neglected, and wildlife will be overlooked.

Needs Identified

Improve conservation planning for wildlife.

- Mandate and fund (or provide incentives for) integrated conservation planning and implementation (like the NCCP) or through the county General Plan process.
- Develop and provide the scientific data and information to the planners and decision-makers.
- Create a biological framework, standards, and priorities for wildlife planning and conservation.
- Create, implement, and fund statewide policies for integrating wildlife conservation into local land-use planning.

Strengthen state and local leadership for conservation planning.

- Define responsibilities at state and local levels for wildlife conservation, and expand Fish and Game's capacity to assist local governments with conservation planning.
- Coordinate wildlife conservation across state agencies.
- Encourage, support, and provide examples of long-term planning, and provide examples of the economic and quality-of-life benefits of wildlife conservation.

Generate public support.

- Provide incentives for private landowners to undertake wildlife conservation.
- Encourage market-based approaches to land stewardship.
- Increase awareness about landscape-scale wildlife conservation.

Ensure adequate funding.

- Secure more program funding for conservation and for operations and maintenance. (See Chapter 4, Strengthening California's Conservation Capabilities, page 39.)
- Integrate wildlife conservation into development funding for transportation and other infrastructure.

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